

Minority-race PM for Singapore inevitable: DPM

Ng Jing Yng

TODAY, 4 July 2015

SINGAPORE — It is inevitable that, at some point, Singapore will have a Prime Minister from a minority race, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam yesterday. But that person would not be him if he was given a choice.

“I am not interested,” he said in response to CNN host Fareed Zakaria during a lunch dialogue at the SG50+ conference organised by the **Institute of Policy Studies**.

He added: “Let me put it this way. We all have our preferences and I was always, in sports, playing centre-half rather than centre-forward. I enjoy playing half-back and making the long passes, but I am not the striker. Unless I am forced to be, and I don’t think I will be forced to it because I think we’ve got choices. We won’t always get it the way we expect it to be, but we think very hard about succession in Singapore. And I think we’ve got a crop of people who are in the fray already and entering the fray who will provide future leadership.”

Dr Zakaria had asked Mr Tharman, who is also the Finance Minister, if the Republic could have an Indian Prime Minister.

Mr Tharman’s immediate response was to make clear that he was not keen on the office. Nevertheless, he said: “It seems to me, inevitable, that at some point, a minority Prime Minister, Indian, Malay or Eurasian or some mixture, is going to be a feature of the political landscape. Because we’ve got a meritocracy, it is an open system. It is just a matter of time.”

When Dr Zakaria pointed out that 75 per cent of the citizen population is Chinese, Mr Tharman noted that the country is evolving.

“The common space where everyone is growing up in is much larger than it used to be, pre-Independence or even in our early decades. It is a pretty strong common space. An education system where everyone is educated with first language, English. You go through common experiences together, National Service. So it is a matter of time.”

Dr Zakaria then pressed Mr Tharman if he was declaring himself to be totally out of the running to become Prime Minister.

Mr Tharman reiterated that Singapore is in a fortunate situation “where there is a great deal of trust and confidence” in the current leadership and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 63. “Fortunately, he is very healthy. And we have, very importantly in the wings, a group of younger people,” said Mr Tharman, whom Dr Zakaria pointed out was five years younger than Mr Lee.

Mr Tharman also spoke on the political system here. “We should keep our minds open as to how this will evolve. We can’t decide how, 30 or 40 years from now, how our politics will be. We can’t decide in advance,” he said.

Nevertheless, based on Singapore's history and "our sense of the realities we operate in", the country needs a system "where the centre holds strong". "The centre doesn't hold strong because of the invisible hand of society, quite the opposite," Mr Tharman said. "The invisible hand of society tends to pull things away from the centre. It holds strong because you've got a Government elected by people that works to keep it strong."

Mr Tharman also reiterated the importance of not pandering to short-term desires of the people.

"There is a sense in which if votes go down significantly, any government would tend to focus more on the short-term than long-term...the current (Singapore) government wants as much as it can to preserve a culture where we keep a focus on the long-term, in the interests of people, because that's what is fair," he said. "We have in Singapore created a culture among the people that you cannot win votes in Singapore by promising the absurd...(this culture) can easily slip away...(but) we've got to stick with it."

He also corrected the misperception that the Government made a shift in social policies after the 2011 General Election. These changes were first set in motion in 2008, he said.

Asked by Dr Zakaria about the People's Action Party's dominance in Parliament - it holds 80 out of 87 seats - Mr Tharman replied: "That's an outcome, not a design."